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SUBJECT: Thai Government Affirms Importance of Peace Corps and Seeks to Deepen Partnership

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¶1. Summary: Prime Minister Abhisit, Thai Princess Sirindhorn, and the Director of Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency (TICA) all affirmed on November 5 that the Peace Corps Thailand program remains an anchor of the enduring Thai-U.S. bilateral partnership. Accompanied by Ambassador John, visiting Peace Corps (PC) Director Aaron Williams expressed appreciation to the Prime Minister, Princess, and TICA Director for the support of the RTG and warm welcome the Thai nation has provided volunteers throughout the PC's 47 year experience in Thailand. Abhisit noted his hope that Peace Corps continues to strengthen in presence in Thailand, particularly through the successful Village Health Volunteers Program. Director Williams, Ambassador John, and TICA Director Apinan discussed additional areas for potentially increased cooperation, including collaboration between PC and TICA on food security issues, both at the program and field-level. Princess Sirindhorn shared fond memories of her experience with individual PC volunteers. End Summary.

Peace Corps and Thailand: An Enduring Partnership

¶2. In separate meetings on November 5, visiting Peace Corps (PC) Director Aaron Williams and Ambassador John called on Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva; Apinan Phatarathiyanon, Director-General of TICA; and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, a daughter of Thailand's King Bhumibol, accompanied by Peace Corps Thailand Director John Williams. Also present in the meeting was Elisa Montoya, Peace Corps White House Liaison; Allison Price, Peace Corps Communication's Director; and Jeffrey West, Special Assistant to the Peace Corps Director. Director Williams expressed deep appreciation for the continued support of the RTG and Thai people. He described the relationship between the Royal Thai Government (RTG) and the Peace Corps as a true partnership, evidenced by the RTG's provision of all housing costs for all 89 volunteers serving in Thailand, in addition to approximately USD 24,000 in project support this year.

¶3. Director Williams explained that Peace Corps' partnership with the people of Thailand is one of its strongest in the world, dating back 47 years, during which time nearly 5,000 volunteers have served in sectors such as education, rural and community development, small business development, malaria eradication, health and HIV/AIDS, agriculture, forestry, environment, and fisheries. The PC Volunteers in Thailand today are working with Thai counterparts on two projects: one focused on the RTG's education reform initiative and the other on community based organizational development through Sub-District Administrative Organizations (SAOs). An additional 61 trainees are expected to arrive in January 2010. Williams explained our willingness to continue this partnership for as long as the people of Thailand believe it is beneficial in achieving RTG development goals and Peace Corps resources allow.

¶4. Prime Minister Abhisit thanked Director Williams for the Peace Corps work in Thailand, stating that the Thai people welcome the

volunteers with open arms and that both Thailand and the United States benefit from the improved cross-cultural understanding PC promotes. (Note: Director Williams provided anecdotes from his November 3 visit to volunteers in Uthai Thani and Chainat Provinces north of Bangkok and others around the world to emphasize volunteers come from all walks of life and represent various age groups. He also explained the importance of in-country training for volunteers, highlighted in Thailand through successful homestays with Thai families. Williams also shared his pride that Thai national Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary General of ASEAN, often speaks of his mentoring as a child by PC volunteers. End Note.) Abhisit noted the importance of PC's focus on community-based development and a knowledge-based economy as a way to mobilize social capital. The Prime Minister also noted Thailand's success in the area of health, which has caused other countries to look at Thailand's health care system as a model. As such, the Thai government hopes Peace Corps can strengthen the Village Health Volunteers Program throughout Thailand as a possible new area for future collaboration.

Deepening the Partnership

¶ 15. In a separate morning meeting, TICA Director General Apinan echoed PM Abhisit's thanks and praise for PC's enduring partnership with the Thai people (referring to PC volunteers as ambassadors for the United States and, upon their return, Thailand's ambassadors abroad). Linking his comments to greater ASEAN integration, Apinan explained that the RTG is hoping to expand its own fledgling international volunteer program, created approximately five years ago and modeled to a large extent on PC. He stated the program's focus is on technical cooperation and that volunteers serve in Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Bhutan, and beyond. Apinan eagerly asked about PC's long-term plans with Thailand, which sparked a discussion in which he, Director Williams, and Ambassador John exchanged ideas (and agreed) on possible ways to deepen the already successful PC-RTG partnership.

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¶ 16. Ambassador John noted the synergy between the goals of the PC and RTG volunteer programs, and those of the USG Food Security Initiative. He suggested PC and TICA explore coordination in this area at the field level, headquarters level, or both. The idea of developing a partnership, focused on strengthening the Village Health Volunteers Program was mentioned by Director Williams as an example of possible new sector for collaboration; but was mentioned only in terms of possibilities in the future and not as a concrete proposal.

Additional ideas included:

- have PC volunteers mentor their Thai counterparts in locations where both PC and Thai volunteers are present;
- have interested Thai university students work voluntarily over school breaks with PC Thailand volunteers; and
- organize a conference on expanding volunteerism for interested nations from ASEAN, and the United States.

Princess Sirindhorn

¶ 17. Princess Sirindhorn was gracious in receiving PC Director Williams. The Director stated that he was aware of her interest in promoting volunteerism and that he was aware that the Princess herself was engaged in supporting many development projects. The Princess spoke of her work in supporting schools for disadvantaged children in rural areas throughout the country. She mentioned by name a Peace Corps volunteer named Sean that she has met in Nan Province about three years ago and who was teaching English to novice monks in one of the schools she sponsors in Nan Province. She also recalled other instances in the past when she had occasion to meet Peace Corps volunteers. The Director thanked Princess Sirindhorn for her support for Peace Corps as evidenced by her patronage at the 45th anniversary celebration of Peace Corps in Thailand in 2007. Director Williams noted PC Thailand will be celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2012 and that Peace Corps would be honored if the Princess would join that celebration as well.